

PREFACE

I have always had Christian art in my heart and visiting many churches, monasteries and museums associated with Christian art over the years, I have felt the need for a Guide to allow me to better understand the message of these exceptionally beautiful images. Reading many publications on the subject, I decided that what I need is a Visual Guidebook, orientated towards the pictorial symbols in Christian art. Thus I started this book, based on the many photos, I collected over the years, hoping it will be also useful to other people who, like me, love Christian art.

In various encyclopaedias, the definition of **symbol** is similar: e.g. in Larousse - *a visual expression of an idea, concept, universal truth*; or in Britannica - *a communication element intended to represent or denote a complex of persons, objects, groups, or ideas*. Generally speaking, a pictorial symbol is an image that has another (often hidden) meaning. Some of the frequently seen large images in churches are biblical scenes that visually represent the "picture described with words" from a relevant text in the Bible. These **symbolic scenes** convey to the worshiper the same meaning and teaching as the "word picture". The symbolic scenes are described in detail in many sources. Chapter 6 of this Guidebook gives only an introduction to them and lists books on the subject. However, around and within these scenes, and throughout the decoration of the church, there are many other single images (elements of the scene) with symbolic meaning - for example: there are palm trees around saints; there is often a deer in front of the baptisteries; there is a vine or ivy around central images; Christ (or His symbol) is often in an octagonal frame; the Virgin Mary is often among roses; some images are flanked by pelta shields; some mosaic panels contain specific birds and animals; certain elements are repeated a specific number of times, etc. All of these pictorial symbols have an additional meaning which at the time of early Christianity was known only to the initiated - the Christians. These symbolic images became part of the Christian tradition and can be seen in all churches. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 of this Visual Guidebook aim to present these **main symbols** and relate their descriptions to actual depictions from Christian mosaics and other objects of Christian art.

It is known that many early Christian theologians were opposed to the use of images in churches and places of prayer, considering some objects of Christian art as idols. But the very fact that they wrote on the subject shows that early Christians decorated the places where they gathered. For the majority of these people, images in churches and places of prayer had as much to do with a desire to decorate the House of their God as with a better understanding of His teachings. St Nilus of Sinai (4-5th century) wrote that these images served as books for those who could not read. However, these images were not just for the uneducated. Their extraordinary aesthetics and emotional charge, which we (and all generations from those early centuries to the present) have felt, undoubtedly added a new dimension to people's attachment to Christianity and its beauty. The philosophical force of its teaching and the aesthetic beauty of its art have complemented each other, building a new harmonious morality.

Most of the large objects of early Christian art that have come down to us are mosaics, and naturally the mosaicists who made them used at the beginning the same pattern-

books for mosaic representations as had been used for earlier mosaics in specific buildings or patrician houses in the Roman Empire. But now the symbolism in these new mosaics (various symbolic images existed before Christianity) was being infused with new Christian content. For example, the theologian St Clement of Alexandria (2nd-3rd century) describes what symbols early Christians might put on their seals (finger rings). Exactly what happened in these early centuries we will never know. An important reason for this is not only the remoteness in time and the destruction of icons and related writings and objects during the iconoclasm, but also the unspeakable act of Emperor Constantine VII (reigned 913-959), who destroyed the entire archive of Constantinople under the pretext that it was oversaturated (and replaced some documents with his own abstracts). Thus, not only did information about a huge part of the most constructive period of the Eastern Roman Empire (later-called Byzantium) "disappear", but also a lot of information about the earliest centuries of Christianity was lost.

While in the first centuries of Christianity the symbols in the images had the meaning of hidden signs, after the legalization of Christianity in the 4th century these symbols became part of the Christian tradition. This tradition runs deep in the construction and decoration of churches, in the works of artists, mosaicists, sculptors and architects. Obviously, they planned the church decoration with clergymen, but there are no remaining documents describing this process of planning – what symbols were to be included where. Despite this, knowing the meaning of the symbolic elements is a part of understanding the artist's message, along with the aesthetic pleasure of observing his work.

Some descriptions of the symbols have survived from the early centuries of Christianity, through the Middle Ages to the present day, but these descriptions are mostly verbal, or supported by artist's sketches. There are very few books with actual depictions of the pictorial symbols as they exist in the early Christian art and its mosaics. Of course, this is normal because colour photography and printing only became established in the second half of the 20th century.

A great deal has been written about Christian teaching. However, extracting and systematizing the descriptions of the main pictorial symbols, and linking them to appropriate mosaic images, is a process with its own specifics. It should be borne in mind that the early Christians were of different nationalities and lived in different areas of the vast Roman Empire. Thus, there are some local variations in the interpretation of certain symbols (as well as images typical of particular areas). The scarce information, scattered throughout many centuries and countries, makes the scientific analysis of the development and spread of the pictorial (single image) symbols an almost impossible task. Hence this modest Visual Guidebook attempts only to link the main Christian symbols (described in the publications I cite in the Bibliography) with part of my collection of images/photographs of Christian art from churches, museums, and archaeological sites. The wonderful publications on Christian art naturally emphasize its exceptional aesthetic value. In addition, the Guidebook points out the

symbolic meaning of the various images, according to the sources, thus showing part of the basis of the "visual alphabet" used in church decoration.

The mosaics are some of the oldest coloured art objects to reach us in their original form. They show us the high aesthetic level of the ancient mosaicists - a sumptuous world of shapes and colours, filling the imagination and hearts of the many admirers of this art. For this reason, I have oriented the Guidebook to the laymen - those who love mosaics and would like to learn more about them and their symbolic message in Christian art. The first chapter of the Guidebook, as well as the first article of each of the chapters are written as introductions. Thus, the main purpose of the Guidebook is educational, but I believe part of it would also be of use to specialists mosaicists, art historians, theologians, and students in related fields.

An object of art should be seen not only as a vehicle of aesthetic harmony, but also as an indication of the time when it was created. In this connection, the book also contains brief information about these times - about some personalities, events and buildings. In order to facilitate the use of the Guidebook, I have tried to use concentrated text, illustrated with a considerable number of figures.

For nearly a quarter of a century, my love of Christian art has gone well beyond the point of a serious hobby. In the last 15 years I have seen most of the Christian mosaics within the confines of the Roman Empire. My collection of photographs lent itself as the backbone for the visual pattern of symbols described in the book. One of the main challenges in the Guidebook project was the selection of illustrative examples for each symbol, as some are not obvious at first sight.

During the same time, I was active in my profession (physics of medical imaging) and its international development. This work included the creation of the first e-books and educational image databases in the profession. This grew into the creation of the first Encyclopaedia and the first Scientific Dictionary of Medical Physics (now translated into 31 languages) - huge projects for which I created original methodology. These projects took 20 years to develop and involved over 400 specialists from 51 countries. The projects received many international awards, but also in the course of this I gained experience of classification and encyclopaedic structuring that was of great use to me for this Visual Guidebook.

The Guidebook describes about 330 single pictorial symbols illustrated with about 500 figures from 25 countries. The photos in the Guidebook were collected over a long period of time, with different cameras and at different lighting conditions (mosaic reflection changes significantly with ambient light and dust). Thus, the photographs have some inevitable variation of quality.

The few books on the subject cite mainly mosaics from Western Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Usually, only the specialized publications include information on the extremely valuable early Christian mosaics from the Balkans. In the Guidebook I have therefore included mosaics from these regions, emphasizing the fact that it was the Roman Emperors from the Balkan provinces Thrace and Illyria who were the main generators of the legalization of Christianity and its transformation from a small

religion (in the 3-4th centuries, Christians were only 10% of the population of the Roman Empire) into the state religion of the largest empire in Europe.

My love for Christian art was ignited by the mosaics in my native town Plovdiv, Bulgaria and those of Aquileia (near ICTP, Trieste, Italy, where I co-organized the International College of Medical Physics for many years). These two cities contain the largest concentration in Europe of in-situ church floor mosaics from the 4th century - the beginning of intensive church building. Thus, I have naturally included a significant number of mosaics from these exceptional centres of early Christian art. For this reason, I am grateful to the archaeologists, mosaicists, art-historians and clergymen, restorers, and supporters of this art in Plovdiv and Aquileia. I am grateful to Dr. Elena Kantareva, the head of the restoration of the mosaics in Plovdiv, for our conversations on the matter and to Ms. Katya Staykova from the Foundation Friends of the Basilica, Plovdiv for popularizing my work. I am also grateful to our friends and various specialists for the feedback and advise during the preparation of the Guidebook.

I am very grateful to the authors of books and publications in the field of Christian art who have helped me to better comprehend this extraordinary part of human creativity. I am also very grateful to the churches and monasteries, the museums and institutions that made it possible to photograph their Christian art so that more people can experience its richness and the power of its message through the photos.

I would like to thank most sincerely my family for their incredible support for this huge project, and especially my wife and colleague Dr Vassilka (Assia) Tabakova, who shared with me most of the travels, visits and photographs in different places, and with whom we went through the various revisions of the text of this Guidebook. I would also like to especially thank her and Mr Myles Oliver for their extremely valuable help in editing the English text of the Guidebook.

I would be very happy if this Visual Guidebook would get more people interested in the Christian art preserved by the church, by museums and institutions. The exceptionally beautiful mosaics are not only part of our history, but also one of the most precious legacies from our ancestors.

SDT

tesserae for floor mosaics is difficult, so the number of shades is often less than 7. The mosaic of the Episcopal Basilica of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, includes a wonderfully made such "rainbow" pattern - Fig. 3.11.6.



Fig. 3.11.5 God creates the sun, moon and stars in the sky (7 levels), wall mosaic (detail), 12th century, Monreale Duomo, Palermo

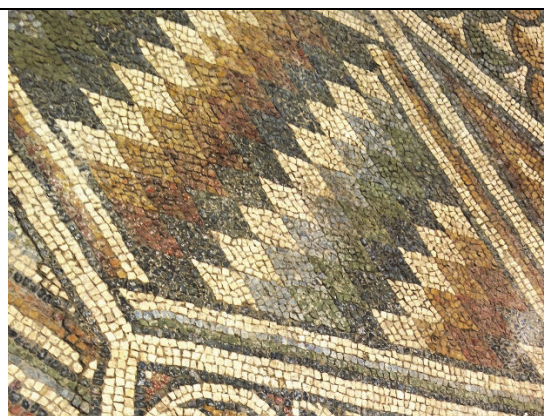


Fig.3.11.6 Rainbow mosaic in a rhombus, floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Episcopal Basilica Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Seven is also linked to the seven sacraments, but these are very complex to depict in mosaics. One rare example of an elaborate scene is the depiction of the Seven Acts of Mercy in a 15th-century stone carving in Rosslyn Chapel (near Edinburgh), Scotland (Fig. 3.11.7 a, b)



Fig.3.11.7.a) Seven Acts of Mercy, stone frieze, 15th century, Rosslyn chapel, Scotland; b) detail from a) - "Feeding the Hungry"

3.12 EIGHT, OCTAGON

The digit **8** is a symbol associated with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (from "the Eighth day" - the day of the Resurrection). It is most often depicted as an **octagon** or an **eight-pointed star**. It is accepted as a symbol of both - the Resurrection and Jesus Christ.

The Jewish week ends with Saturday (the seventh day of the week is Sabbath - rest). The following day (Sunday) is the first day of the new week. But because God raised Jesus on this day, early Christians set it apart specifically from the other days as the "Eighth Day" – "Lord's Day". St Augustine specifies this in his answer to Faustus of Mileve: "... *His Resurrection on the third day, which we call the Lord's Day, the day after the Sabbath, and therefore the eighth...* "

In many mosaics and frescoes, the octagon is used both on its own and as a frame within which other symbols are contained - for example, the deer/stag (Fig. 3.12.1), which is beside the Good Shepherd (a symbol of Jesus Christ - see 5.3).

The **octagon** symbol was considered as a natural link between the “earthly” square and the “heavenly” circle. A number of Christian buildings use octagonal architecture. For example, the first Nativity Basilica, built by Constantine the Great in Bethlehem (c. 333), had an octagonal structure (over the Grotto of the Nativity). Some of the baptisteries were also built with an octagonal shape. In many places in Europe, there are towers of octagonal-shaped churches, as well as domes of churches supported by 8 columns (see for example the octagonal baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence - Fig. 6.3.11 and the octagonal dome of the Palatine Chapel in the Marienkirche Aachen - Fig. 3.13.5).

The **eight-pointed (octagonal) star** (Fig. 3.12.2.a,b) has the same symbolism. It is also often depicted as two interlaced squares rotated at 45 degrees (Fig. 2.8.1) - see also 2.12 for the interlaced figures. The eight-pointed star is often used in Orthodox icons and frescoes (around the Virgin Mary with the Little Jesus or around Jesus Christ Himself). The Star of Bethlehem is depicted as either a six-pointed or an eight-pointed star. The mosaic of the dome of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia is with eight-pointed stars (see Fig. 3.4.5). The star at San Vitale, Ravenna (Fig. 4.14.4) is eight-pointed.

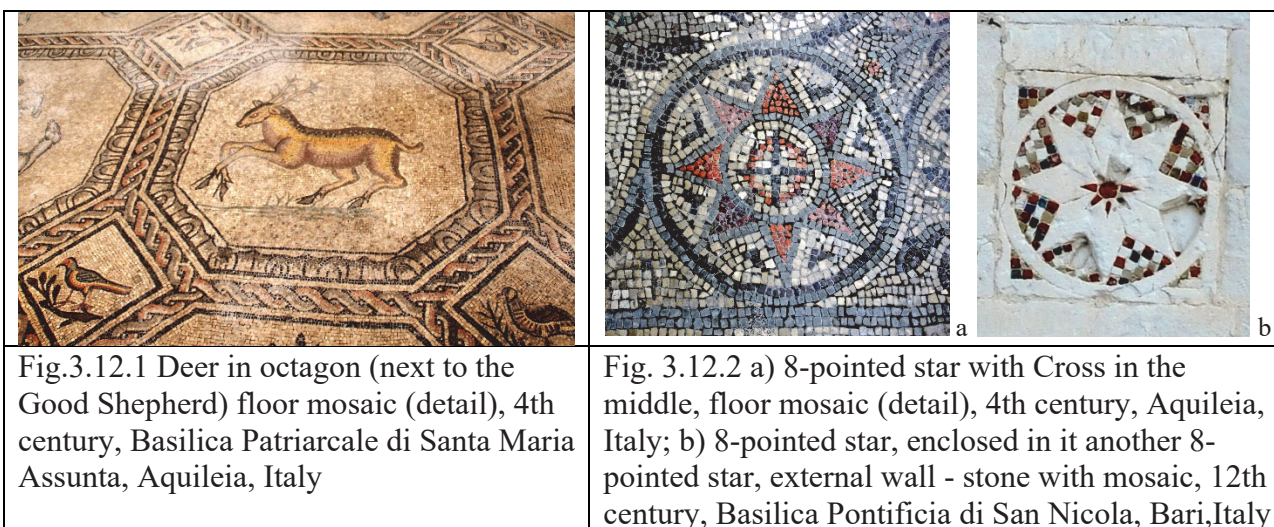


Fig.3.12.1 Deer in octagon (next to the Good Shepherd) floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Basilica Patriarcale di Santa Maria Assunta, Aquileia, Italy

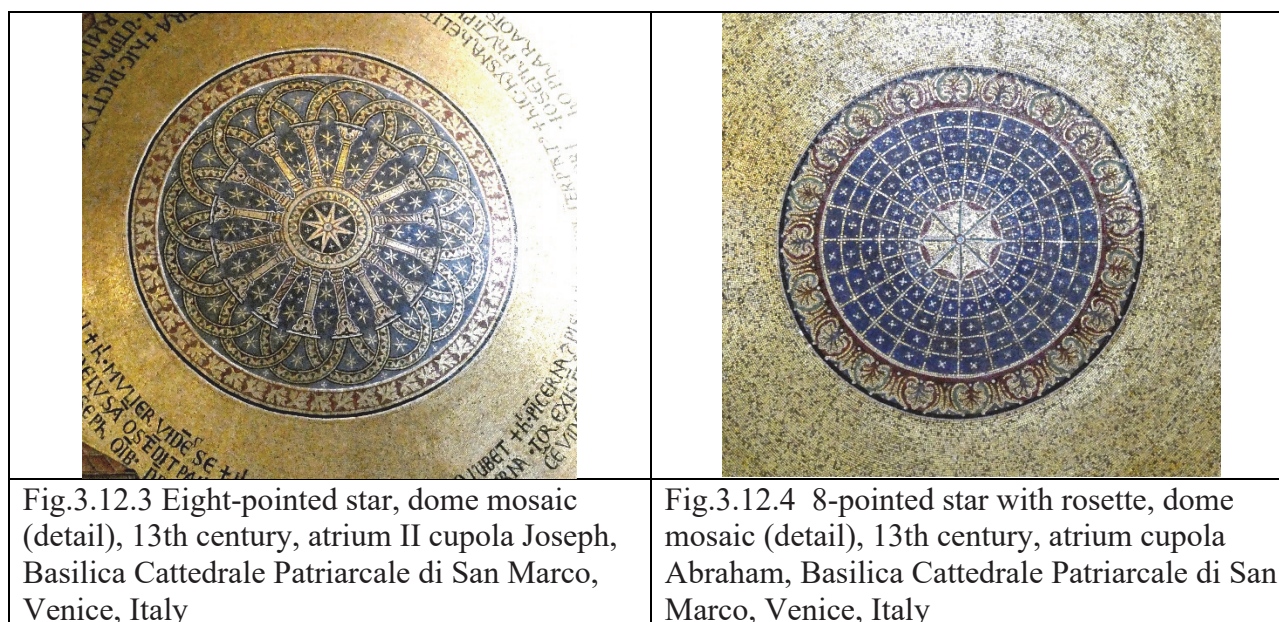
Fig. 3.12.2 a) 8-pointed star with Cross in the middle, floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Aquileia, Italy; b) 8-pointed star, enclosed in it another 8-pointed star, external wall - stone with mosaic, 12th century, Basilica Pontificia di San Nicola, Bari, Italy

Often the eight-pointed star or eight-pointed rosette (with eight petals/sectors) is accompanied by elements divisible by 8. For example, the star of one dome in the atrium of San Marco in Venice (Fig. 3.12.3) is flanked by $2 \times 8 = 16$ columns forming 16 arches. On another dome in the atrium of San Marco, each sector of the eight-sectors rosette is divided into 3 parts forming $3 \times 8 = 24$ radial rays (Fig. 3.12.4). On another inner dome of San Marco, the Cross is surrounded by a multi-coloured “rainbow halo” with eight sectors.

In St Peter's House in Capernaum, Israel, there is a mosaic - a large octagon with a peacock in the centre and, around it, fish scales decorated with roses.

According to the numerical expressions of the letter signs in Koine Greek, the name of Jesus (Ιησους) represented the sum 888. Ιησους (Ι= 10 ; η= 8 ; σ=200 ; ο=70 ; υ=400 ; ς=200) - the sum of these numbers is **888**.

The digit 8 appears frequently in Early Christian art - flowers with 8 petals, rosettes with 8 points/sectors; 8 figures surrounding a large symbol (see Fig. 4.9.6). As an illustration, see Fig. 2.8.1, where the central Cross is in a larger Cross-flower, which is in an octagon, which is in turn surrounded by 8 Solomon's knots (forming the ends of 2 Crosses, each of a different colour), which are in another octagon, which is in an eight-pointed star (made up of two interlaced squares). The eight-pointed star composed of two interlaced squares (Fig. 2.8.1) is also called “*Seal of Melchizedek*” and is used by some Christian societies



In the British Museum there is a 4th century gold-glass medallion (in fact the base of a vessel) depicting a bust of Christ in an eight-pointed star. On the medallion Christ is very young (beardless), with the inscription *Cristus*. Around Him, in the corners of the medallion, are 4 images (perhaps of the Evangelists). Christ and all four images are without haloes, but there are two gold circular “marks” above the shoulders of each.

3.13 OTHER NUMERIC SYMBOLS

There are many other numeric symbols, but they are used less frequently.

9 - in Christianity is considered an angelic digit. According to Dionysius the Areopagite (6th century) there are 3 Angelic orders, each of which has 3 levels (see 5.9).

10 - in addition to the special meaning of 10 associated with the Ten Commandments, 10 is considered a number associated with abundance.

11 – often 11 Apostles are depicted (without Judas). After Judas’ betrayal the remaining Apostles chose Matthias in his place, in order to become 12 again.

4.6 IVY

Ivy was used before Christianity primarily as a Dionysian symbol (Dionysius is usually depicted wearing a crown/garland of ivy). The symbol was also used in Egypt. As an evergreen plant, ivy has become a Christian symbol of immortality and eternal life.

Ivy branches are engraved on sarcophagi and tombstones. In mosaics, ivy leaves are most often used as borders (Fig. 4.6.1), or enclosing images and inscriptions, giving them the meaning of immortal, “reserved for eternal life”. Fig. 4.6.2 shows a mosaic panel from the floor of St Stephen's Church, Umm ar Rasas, Jordan. The panel contains a central image (destroyed during the iconoclastic period), 4 medallions with inscriptions (arranged in a Cross-like form) and 4 mandorlas forming a diagonal Cross. Between them are ivy leaves (8 in total). There is a similar panel at Beit Mery, Lebanon.



Fig.4.6.1 Ivy border, floor mosaic (detail), above: 6th century, M. Nebo Jordan; bottom: 4th century, Butrint, Albania



Fig. 4.6.2 Ivy leaves around the Cruciform composition with text and mandorlas, floor panel (detail), 6th-8th century, Church of St Stephen, Umm ar Rassas, Jordan

The shape of the ivy leaves is close to the shape of a bunch of grapes (the vine and the wine symbolize the blood of Christ - see 5.18), creating a symbolic link between the two images and sometimes they are used together (in Fig. 4.6.3 they are on one branch). The symbols in Fig. 4.6.3 are part of a rinceau-type ornament (see article 4.7 Acanthus). Ivy sometimes replaces the vine in complex symbols (see Fig. 2.13.1 and Fig. 2.13.3 - together with chalice). Fig. 4.6.4 shows a panel with ivy leaves and Cross-like figures, surrounded by Cross-like frames (in brown and yellow colours).

A combination of an ivy leaf with a Christogram ✱ (IX) is shown in Fig. 2.2.2. b and 2.7.2.

According to ancient understanding, the heart was the seat of the soul. For this reason, during mummification in Egypt, the organs were removed from the body, but not the heart (so that the soul in the heart could later be judged for the person's deeds). The connection of the ivy leaf with immortality and the connection of the heart with the “immortal soul” led to the later use of the shape of the ivy leaf as a representation of a heart - ♥.

The ancient understanding of the heart as a special place in the body connected to the soul led to the medieval tradition of burying the hearts of some monarchs separately

from the body. The heart was buried in a place closely associated with the monarch. For example, the body of Richard I the Lionheart was buried in Anjou, France (Fontevraud-l'Abbaye), along with his father Henry II. His heart, however, is buried in Rouen, France (Cathédrale Notre-Dame de l'Assomption de Rouen), which was then the principal city of Normandy (under the English crown).



Fig. 4.6.3 Border of ivy branches with leaves and grapes (rinseau type), floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Episcopal Basilica, Plovdiv, Bulgaria.



Fig. 4.6.4 Ivy-leaf panel with Cross figures, floor mosaic (detail), 6th century, Moses Memorial, Mount Nebo, Jordan

In the 14th century, Pope Innocent VI established in the Catholic Church a service associated with the Sacred Heart as an expression of the love of Jesus Christ for people. This further enriches this symbolism. There are many churches dedicated to the **Sacred Heart**, but the most famous is the relatively new *Sacré-Cœur* Basilica in Paris, France, which has become one of the symbols of the city. Its enormous new apse mosaic of Christ in Glory is one of the largest in the world. On the mosaic, Christ has a heart of gold (the new symbol), but on the arch above Him is depicted a Christogram (the old symbol).

4.7 ACANTHUS

The Acanthus plant is found mainly in the Mediterranean region. Since ancient times it has been used as a symbol of eternal life and as a symbol of overcoming hardships. According to legend, the ancient Greeks placed it on the graves of heroes. The beautiful spiked leaves of the acanthus have become an element in the decoration of Corinthian column capitals.

The prickly acanthus was used by early Christians as a symbol of Christ's suffering and as His triumph over torture. Many church mosaics have borders of acanthus (the graphic depiction of acanthus leaves has slight variations). Often symbolic birds or animals are depicted within this border - Fig. 4.7.1. Acanthus is also used in floor panels - enclosing symbolic images - Fig. 4.7.2 (see also Fig. 3.9.1 and Fig. 2.8.6).

The typical arrangement of the acanthus in Fig. 4.7.1 - in wide spiral braids with figures in between - is called **rinseau** (from French – undulating vine branch with tendrils) and also **Inhabited scroll**. This ornament with symbols and images has been used in the East since ancient times. Later it crossed the Eastern Mediterranean to Ancient Greece (during the Hellenistic period) and became widespread in the Roman Empire. The ornament is used in both mosaics and architecture. The decoration of churches

the wives [be] to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it...” [Ephesians 5:24-25].

Christ is less often depicted in the Orans pose, however in the early Christian mosaic panel from Ravenna (Basilica Sant’Apollinare Nuovo) Jesus Christ is in this pose during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane - Fig. 5.6.5.

5.7 SUN, MOON, STARS

The **sun** is one of the most ancient symbols used in many religions as a representation of God. This is preserved in early Christianity. A typical example is the Sol Invictus (the Invincible Sun - see 5.5) worshipped by the Romans, whose depiction early Christians sometimes related to Jesus Christ.

The Sun is also a symbol of righteousness - according to the prophet Malachi: “*But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings...*” [Malachi 4:2]. Fig. 5.7.1.a shows part of the stone frieze of the Visigothic church of Santa María de Quintanilla de las Viñas, Spain (probably 7th century) - there two angels support an emblem with the sun as Christ. One of the few mosaics with such symbolism is in the necropolis below the Vatican (see *Internet: Christ as Sol Invictus*).

After the legalization of Christianity the Sun became associated with pre-Christian religions, thus the symbol is found primarily in early Christian depictions. Similarly, the **moon** is a symbol of Virgin Mary (the earliest depictions of the moon are associated with pre-Christian goddesses). There is also a moon-like symbol of the Virgin Mary in the same Visigothic church of Santa Maria, mentioned above. It is part of another stone frieze where angels support a moon (Fig. 5.7.1.b).

In Fig. 5.7.2 of the apse mosaic The Coronation of the Virgin (in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome), the Sun and Moon (among stars) are depicted below Christ and the Virgin respectively. As described in [Revelation 12:1] - in early Christianity the Holy Virgin is also symbolically depicted as the sun and the moon, which can also be represented as two opposing swastikas - (see article 2.11 and Fig. 2.11.5).

Stars with the sun and moon are also depicted in scenes of Creation (see 3.11.5).

An ivory engraving from the Louvre, Paris (*Barberini ivory*, 6th century, Byzantium) shows an emperor (probably Justinian), above him is Christ with a sun on one side and a moon and a star on the other. The spear of the emperor is held by a man wearing trousers and a Phrygian cap. Beneath the emperor are two men offering him fruit and ritual bread (they wear Thracian trousers and hats typical for the Balkans).

The Virgin Mary is also depicted with a waxing crescent moon (rising moon). This is associated with the tradition from the time of Bisas (the Thracian king of Bisantion) that the walls of Bisantion were guarded by the goddess Hecate, whose symbol was

this crescent with a star. When Constantine the Great built New Rome (Constantinople) on the site of Byzantium he dedicated the city to the Holy Virgin and transferred the symbol of the impenetrable walls, together with a star, to her.

A sun and moon are also placed over the Crucifixion of Christ, expressing the anguish of the whole Creation at His death. Fig. 5.7.3, with a mosaic from the monastery Hosios Loukas in Greece, represents the sun and moon above the crucified Christ.



Fig.5.7.1 Angels supporting an emblem with a sun (a- top) and a moon (b- bottom), stone frieze, 7th century, Santa María de Quintanilla de las Viñas, Spain



Fig. 5.7.2 Moon and Sun (among stars) below the Virgin and Christ, apse mosaic "Coronation of the Virgin" (detail), 13th century, Basilica Papale di Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy

The **star** is a symbol of divine direction (Guiding star). A typical scene with a star is the Nativity (see Fig. 3.10.4). The "Star of heaven" (*Stella caeli* in Latin) is also a symbol of Virgin Mary. Frequently the Mother of God is depicted with three stars on her garment, one above her forehead and one on each shoulder (Fig. 5.7.4). This symbolism is preserved in many Orthodox icons (where the stars often have additional decoration).

There is a very interesting mosaic calendar panel in Israel (Beit She'an, Scythopolis) - in the 6th century monastery of Our Lady. Calendars with zodiac signs are displayed in Synagogues, but this one was in all likelihood intended to create an image in the church that would be accepted by both Christians and the local Jewish population. The calendar has a male and a female figures in its centre, with a sun and moon above them respectively. Around the central medallion are 12 figures of the months (their names are written in Latin but with Greek letters). All 12 figures are male (while there are months with female names in Latin). The whole scene can also be regarded as similar to a zodiac, and also as Christ with the Virgin Mary, and the 12 Apostles around them (can be seen on *Internet: Scythopolis Lady Mary Monastery mosaic*).